

Murphy Strikes at Sea

by Frank Start

The superintendent of a large communication company in Montreal answered his phone one morning and received a violent blast from the manager of a Canadian shipping line. Quote: "something funny going on around here - I just had a message from our Canadian Destructor in the Panama Canal reporting engine trouble. I can't understand it - we haven't heard from the Captain yet through the usual channels - if that wireless operator is trying to be funny, he is in for some serious trouble. I'm having this investigated and you will hear from me further." And the phone went dead.

And now for the rest of the story. The wireless operator on this ship was on the return half of his first trip to Australia. The last three weeks crossing the Pacific had been the most trying and the most exasperating of his life. It is the usual custom at sea on the homeward-bound voyage that there is a general clean-up. The ship is washed from stem to gudgeon and almost everything gets a coat of paint.

Sparks (that's the P.B.O.) caught the clean-up fever and decided to clean up the radio shack as it had never been cleaned up before. First, the emergency storage batteries needed attention. This was a 60-cell lead-acid type to supply the main converter. All cells required water. This was going to be a very tedious job. He had a bright idea. He lifted the heavy cover, removed all the cell covers and waited for a gentle rain. Alas, the passing shower was a cloud-burst and filled all the cells to over-flowing before the cover could be replaced. Clean-up of the resulting mess was a major operation and nearly electrocuted Sparks. He started to clean up the excess electrolyte around the cells in his bare feet. To duplicate this effect, one must stand on a wet deck and grasp a 150 VDC line. And getting acid into cuts and under finger nails is most unpleasant.

In the shack, the biggest job was to clean up the deck (floor). Now the Captain of this ship had been trained in the old tradition of "wooden ships and iron men". And all the decks had to be WHITE. Wood decks had to be cleaned with a holy stone (sandstone) and oxalic acid. In the radio shack everything on the deck which was not nailed down was placed on shelves or on the bunk, out of the way. A portable typewriter was put on a shelf and on top of it were placed the tubes from the receiver. Normally, these tubes, when in the receiver stuck out horizontally from the panel. (Spares had been used during the trip). With a pail of water and sand, and in his bare feet, Sparks proceeded to work on the deck, pushing a piece of holy stone on the end of a long handle, back and forth in the mess of sand and water. (Oh! For the life on the rolling main!) The finishing touches were made with canvas and sand plus Sani-flush (the modern ingredient) to whiten the pine planks. This was hard on the feet but it sure cleaned them. In the midst of these strenuous efforts with the handle moving at a fast rate, there was a sudden crash and tinkle of breaking glass. An ominous heart-breaking sound. The typewriter lay in a mess of wet sand and under neath were the remains of three tubes - relegated to a condition of permanent desuetude (to put it mildly). What nautical profanity polluted the atmosphere of that little radio shack! Eight hundred miles west of the Panama Canal and back we go "on crystal". And the Old Man calling for time signals night and day because of cranky chronometers. Sparks had horrible visions of

being keel-hauled and strung up the yard-arm.

The day before expected arrival time at Balboa, (the western terminus of the Panama Canal although it's actually east of the Atlantic end) Sparks tried all day to raise NBA(Balboa) but due to rain and the usual tropical QRN making conditions worse than usual, got no reply. It happened to be Christmas Day and it might have been that somebody was celebrating, but it wasn't Sparks or any of the ship's crew. Cold storage chicken was the best the galley staff could come up with and there were no trimmings. There was no cause for celebration, especially following a report from the Chief Engineer that the main engine was developing serious problems.

Late in the evening, Sparks finally got a reply from NBA and received orders to drop anchor and await Canal Transit in the morning. So that was the end of that long leg of the voyage home and Sparks heaved a sigh of relief as he shut down the old spark transmitter and gave the crystal a dirty look. It would have been nice to go alongside a jetty and give the boys a chance to go ashore. Kelly's Ritz in Panama City would be going great guns tonight. But Sparks had other means of soothing his frazzled nerves. He had his ham gear along with him on this voyage. One of the first Canadian Commercial Operators to do this. He soon had this all cranked up on twenty metres and after a few preliminary QSOs, contacted a VE2 in Montreal. His luck had not forsaken him entirely - here was the old home town again. But here he was about to make a grave error. During the past few weeks he had been through so many troubles. Murphy had been rough.

There had been nobody on board that could really understand all his grief - he had to solve all his troubles himself. So when he got started pouring forth (to this VE2) all his troubles, he didn't know when to stop and added the story of the engine trouble which might delay their transit of the Canal tomorrow. So what happened? The VE2 got on the phone and spilled the beans. The General Manager got the bad news ahead of time.

And the moral of the story is: 1 - Don't talk too much, and 2 - don't forget about the Declaration of Secrecy.